



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

News Release

August 10, 2005

5 DOMINICANS CONVICTED OF HUMAN SMUGGLING

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico— Five Dominicans accused of human smuggling during a fatal trip in which 7 illegal immigrants died near the beach of Cerro Gordo in Vega Alta, Puerto Rico, were found guilty by a jury in federal court here yesterday.

After an investigation by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Leonardo Hilario-Hilario, Kennedy Martinez, Fernando Jose-Milan, Delgadino Peguero and Santiago Rodriguez, all nationals of the Dominican Republic, were indicted on Dec. 8, 2004 for alien smuggling. The smuggling attempt resulted in the death of seven Dominican nationals attempting to reach the north coast of Puerto Rico from the Dominican Republic. The overcrowded and fragile boat was carrying 93 undocumented aliens when it capsized on Dec. 3, 2004.

Despite the tremendous efforts by U.S. Coast Guard and the Puerto Rico Police Department Maritime Unit to rescue those aboard the capsizing “yola”, five women, Luz M. Rodriguez-Burgos, Ana Rosa-Mayi, Ana S. Garcia-Garcia, Raquel M. Diaz-Castillo and Secundina Lopez-Sanchez died before the rescuers arrived to the scene. Two males, Rafael Martinez-Bello and Inocencio Argas-Lora also perished in their attempt to make it Puerto Rico illegally.

“Smugglers have no regard for human life and will put people at risk just to make a profit,” said Lydia St. John-Mellado, acting special agent-in-charge of ICE in Puerto Rico. “Smugglers are putting people at risk by exposing them to dangerous conditions and ICE cannot and will not tolerate this criminal activity. We encourage people who want to come to the United States to use legal means to do so and not to risk their lives by dealing with unscrupulous smugglers.”

Since Oct. 1, 2004, 2,622 migrants from the Dominican Republic have been intercepted crossing the Mona Passage in their illegal trip to Puerto Rico.

Disrupting and dismantling human smuggling and trafficking rings has been a top priority for ICE since the agency was established in March 2003, given the potential threat that these organizations pose both to national security and public safety. With ICE's broad authorities for enforcing immigration and customs laws and its expertise in financial investigations, the agency is able to pursue human smuggling organizations more aggressively than ever before. As a result, ICE agents arrested more than 1,630 human smugglers nationwide in fiscal year 2004.

ICE

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was established in March 2003 as the largest investigative arm of the Department of Homeland Security. ICE is comprised of five integrated divisions that form a 21st century law enforcement agency with broad responsibilities for a number of key homeland security priorities.